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SUBJECT: CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS VATICAN - U.S. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
CONCERNS

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Summary

¶1. Last December marked the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of Dignitatis Humanae, an influential document from the Second Vatican Council in 1965. To commemorate this, Embassy Vatican hosted a conference on January 18 in Rome. An overflow crowd of 140 influential Vatican officials, media, ambassadors and members of the Holy See diplomatic corps attended the event. All attendees received a copy of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report Executive Summary. Before the event Poloff briefed all of the speakers on the IRF Report and gave each one a copy. End Summary.

Participants

¶2. At a conference sponsored by Embassy Vatican on the Vatican II document Dignitatis Humanae three American speakers gave presentations on its significance to religious freedom. Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Archbishop of Washington, DC, spoke about the importance of religious freedom and his work promoting religious freedom worldwide; Dr. Scott Appleby, Director of the Notre Dame Institute for International Peace Studies, addressed the historical origins of the document; and Jim Towey, Director of the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives addressed the audience on the importance of religious freedom. Influential members of the Vatican Curia in attendance included Archbishop Foley, the President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications; Monsignor Pietro Parolin, Under Secretary for Relations with States (equivalent to "Deputy Foreign Minister"); and Monsignor Gabriele Caccia, Assessor for General Affairs (equivalent to "Deputy Minister of Interior").

Opening Remarks

¶3. The Ambassador began the conference by reiterating President Bush's thoughts on the importance of religious freedom, "...we are grateful for our freedoms as Americans, especially the freedom to worship. We are grateful that freedom is spreading to still new regions of the world, and we pray that those who still live in the darkness of tyranny will some day see the light of freedom." The Ambassador stressed the inalienable right of all people to be free in the expression of their religious beliefs, a cornerstone of Dignitatis Humanae.

Church and American Perspective

¶4. Cardinal McCarrick cited his experiences throughout the world as an American representative of the Roman Catholic Church. McCarrick stressed the United States' role in promoting human rights and dignity; the struggle for religious liberty and its relationship to democracy was a strong theme in his discourse. Cardinal McCarrick also noted the importance of the IRF report as a tool for encouraging religious freedom throughout the world. As a well-respected representative of both the USG and the Catholic Church, Cardinal McCarrick gives credit and essential support to the USG position on religious freedom and creates continued support within the Catholic Church.

An Historical Perspective

¶5. Dr. Scott Appleby from Notre Dame University spoke on the history of the document. His speech revolved around development of religious freedom in the United States and the role of American Catholic clergy. Dr. Appleby noted parallels between the Catholic Church's changed attitude towards religious freedom and the current situation in the Muslim world and emphasized the importance of the disparities within the Islamic faith.

White House Perspective

¶6. Jim Towey, Director of the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives gave the White House perspective, stating that religious and political freedom go hand in hand. Mr. Towey invited all in attendance to read the IRF report and gave the state department web address and requested that people not just read the report, but also share it with their

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colleagues. He explained the four core principles in the administration of funds from his office; no favoritism - "there must be impartiality, there must be a respect for minority faiths, minority groups, to respect even the rights of atheists, to be atheists", no discrimination in terms of the people served by the funds, no funding of inherently religious activities and no coercion - individuals participating in programs funded by the federal government must have a choice and cannot be forced to participate in religious observance in order to receive services. This explanation was welcomed by the audience as the Catholic Church and its NGOs are very large recipients and administrators of these funds.

Media Coverage

¶7. Media coverage for this event was considerable. Media in attendance included Catholic News Service, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, FIDES News Agency, Vatican Radio, National Catholic Register, 30 Days (Italian), ZENIT News Service, ANSA News Service, REUTERS, I. Media (French), FOX, and L'Espresso. ZENIT News Service published an article January 18, Catholic News Service, distributed to diocesan newspapers throughout the U.S., published an article January 19 and Vatican Radio News carried the story in English, Italian and German. Several other news outlets will be publishing articles in the coming weeks.

Comment

¶8. The Catholic Church is an ardent supporter of worldwide religious freedom promoting the rights of all people, regardless

of religious affiliation. Post works with the Holy See on IRF issues, exchanging information and developing strategies for engagement in countries of mutual concern. The conference was very well received; robust attendance by Vatican officials, press and the diplomatic corps highlighted Vatican - U.S. cooperation and the USG's leadership role in international religious freedom. Senior Holy See officials including Monsignor Parolin, the equivalent of "Deputy Foreign Minister" praised the conference in subsequent comments to the Ambassador.

Several references by speakers to the IRF report and the distribution of its Executive Summary to all participants created further opportunity for engagement on the issue. The IRF report is already required reading in most Curial offices.
End Comment.

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